To Block or Not to Block?
The Complicated Territory
of Social Networking

By Michael McVey, Ed.D.

While standing behind a young woman in the school's computer lab one day, I watched with interest as she updated her MySpace page. Just as she was about to save her work, she noticed me and, in a chilly tone, said, "Do you mind? This is private."

I could almost hear 100 million subscribers to social networking sites begging to differ. Online social networking is more than just a passing fad; it's a phenomenon that unifies people of all ages across the Internet and around the world.

The global growth of online social networking is startling. In 2006, only 7% of active Facebook users lived outside the United States; today, that number is 63%. According to market researchers ComScore Media Metrix (Swartz 2008), in the past year, the number of users of social networking sites increased by 50% in Asia, by 31% in Latin America, and by 69% in the Middle East.

The most popular social networking sites are Facebook and MySpace—both founded in the United States. However, the United States does not have a corner on the market. Hi-5 is rooted in Asia, Skyrock in France, and LinkedIn in the United Kingdom.

The Annenberg School for Communication's 2008 Digital Future Project Survey (www.digitalcenter.org) found that social networking has taken root in all ages in society, suggesting that adults are also using social networking to connect with people. According to the report, among Internet users aged 50 and older who are members of online communities, 58% log into their online community daily or several times a day, compared with 47% of members younger than 20.

People to People

The driving force of social networking sites like MySpace and Facebook is social connectivity. People can now share and comment on videos, writings, Websites, and more. They can review and opine about everything from pizza parlors to politics. Friends, acquaintances, colleagues, and utter strangers swap images, movies, games, blogs, and bookmarks.

Sites like LibraryThing (www.librarything.com) allow a user to place online the titles from an entire lending library of books and then discuss them online. Even applications that at first blush appear to be without social networking characteristics actually are. For example, MapQuest (www.MapQuest.com) offers maps and directions, as well as the opportunity to review and discuss myriad subjects—from movies to the service at a restaurant.

And there's the networking. LinkedIn (www.linkedin.com), for example, is a professional networking site designed to help participants develop their careers. Ryze.com is a similar free network. Members get a free network-oriented home page and can send messages to other members. They can also join special networks related to their industry, interests, or

location. According to Ryze, more than 1,000 organizations host networks on its site to help their members interact with one another and grow their organizations.

Employee Interaction

If your district is only now beginning to develop policies on employee use of networking sites, you are a couple of years late. Employees may already participate in social networking sites, such as Facebook or MySpace. Several education associations have Facebook accounts; the number of Listservs related to teaching and learning is astounding; and collaboration through online communities is commonplace among educators.

Such applications may be valuable to educators attempting to network and reach out to a larger community, but they should be aware that they can and should adjust their privacy settings so details of their profiles are available only to those whom they invite.

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Some employees will be conscientious about their online interactions, but just as many may become caught up in online publication of information that could not only put their jobs in jeopardy but could also compromise their privacy, or their perceived sense of privacy. For example, they should be aware that displaying their day and year of birth on a profile page or sharing details of an upcoming trip might invite an unscrupulous person to abuse that information.

Adding personal insights to guest books, writing blogs, and interacting online through learning communities—all valid means for professional development and growth—also place the notion of privacy at risk of rapidly being eroded and challenged.

Even if school districts restrict employees from accessing these sites using district hardware, employees can easily set up their own blogs, join social networks, or add casual comments to Facebook pages from home. Public writing happens with such frequency and in so many online venues that a district cannot hope to monitor it.

Changing Education

The school district that slips into draconian policies that block everything social or shared may find itself forcing valid educational opportunities into the shadows and obstructing sites with excellent educational potential. With hundreds of millions of users of social networking sites, there is a new and overwhelming pressure to begin unblocking server ports.

There are valid networking sites with a role to play during school hours. Districts should certainly monitor their servers for social networking activity, but they may want to consider unblocking white-label social networks, such as those from Ning (www.ning.com). Using these sites, teachers can create their own social network complete with safeguards for privacy and for reviewing images and text posted to the site.

White-label Websites have been particularly helpful for schools wishing to enhance communication with parents or the broader community. One excellent example is a network constructed to keep parents current as their students travel to Washington, D.C., on a school trip (http://dc2008.ning.com). On this exemplar site, teachers added podcasts; threaded discussions, images, and videos from the trip; and created an engaging educational experience for not only the students but also their families.

School districts should be aware that if employees are going to use such Websites for valid educational purposes, they should employ the security features the Websites make available. For example, if a teacher is going to use a social networking site to engage students, it should be well within the district's policy to expect and demand a higher level of security to ensure that students are participating safely. Employees should not accept a student into a group or into a network unless they are satisfied that he or she has a legitimate reason for being there.

As applications develop and social networking becomes more commonplace, the worst thing schools could do would be to impose suffocating restrictions on the use of these tools. It would be more valuable and set a better precedent for emerging tools and applications if districts took a proactive stance and educated students and employees on the power of this social networking reality. The more educators and their students know, the easier it will be for districts to maintain their security.

The hint for administrators is to watch the smartest and savviest users for their insights, learn from the mistakes of others, and listen to the advice of security experts.

Reference

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